

Vol. 45 No. 9 · 4 May 2023

# Lunch in Gordon Square

Sam Rose

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CLIVE BELL AND THE MAKING OF MODERNISM

by Mark Hussey.

Bloomsbury, 578 pp., £14.99, February 2022, 978 1 4088 9441 5

**C**live Bell grew up in a grand house on the edge of a Wiltshire village, the younger son in a family whose upper-class existence was funded by the profits from Welsh coal mines. His early (and lasting) passions were hunting, fishing and shooting, but he also harboured literary ambitions. Arriving at Cambridge in 1899, he split his time between the rich sporting set and the intellectuals, befriending Thoby Stephen, who similarly bridged the two, and many of those who would come to form the Bloomsbury Group. (Bell chased Thoby's sister Vanessa for years; she agreed to marry him in 1906, on the day of Thoby's funeral: he caught typhoid while on holiday in Greece with Vanessa and his other sister, Virginia.) It was at Cambridge that Bell first embraced the character he later described as the 'English boy born with fine sensibility, a peculiar feeling for art, or an absolutely first-rate intelligence' who inevitably 'finds himself, from the outset, at loggerheads with the world in which he is to live'. He was determined to escape his origins but also to maintain the advantages of his birth; a 'rebel for life' who, in order to preserve his hold on the 'Bell millions', concealed from his family that he was a conscientious objector during the First World War. For a few days every summer he would watch the cricket at Lord's with his brother, Cory, an army officer and Conservative MP.

Bell was admired for his intellect and range, but his refusal to settle to one way of life meant that he was also regarded as flippant, a poseur with neither the seriousness nor the intelligence to warrant the attention he demanded. According to Lytton Strachey, whom he met at Cambridge, Bell's character had several layers: there was 'the country gentleman layer', 'the Paris decadent layer', 'the 18th-century layer', 'the layer of innocence' and the 'layer of prostitution'. Strachey found it 'difficult to say which is the fond', but added that 'there is the layer of stupidity, which runs transversely through all the other layers.' Bell complained to Strachey that he was made to feel conscious of having been 'trained outside the mystic circle of metropolitan culture wherein alone a young man may hope to acquire the distinguished manner'. But he never seemed to have much concern for other forms of outsiderdom, and his sexual and racial identity was decidedly normative (Strachey and many of his Cambridge contemporaries were homosexual, and his sister-in-law Virginia's husband, Leonard Woolf, was Jewish).

Bell's sense of his own personal freedom shaped his writing career. In 1915 he wrote *Peace at Once*, a pamphlet that pointed out the absurdity of a 'small ruling caste' sending the rest of the population off to die in the name of 'Freedom'. He believed that international solidarity between individuals and opposition to censorship were far more important causes than anything done in the name of an abstraction like the 'nation'. *On British Freedom* (1923) drew attention to the fact that England celebrated free speech while restricting personal freedom with legislation on everything from licensing to sex education. Unfortunately for Bell, it was *Civilisation* (1928), a more strident book, which was seen by younger generations as representing 'Bloomsbury liberalism'. His vision of a civilisation possible 'only when there come together enough civilised individuals to form a nucleus from which light can radiate, and sweetness ooze', seemed to emanate directly from prewar Cambridge. He intended the book in part as a critique of the society that had gone to war in 1914 in the name of 'civilisation', but the vision he offered seemed even to his friends to be an attempt to reproduce the very particular kind of life he had lived himself. It turned out, as Virginia Woolf said, that 'civilisation is a lunch party at No. 50 Gordon Square.'

His later work would not have received as much attention as it did had it not been for the success of his first book, *Art*. Bell's interest in art had been developed by discussions at the Friday Club, started by Vanessa Stephen in 1905, and attended by Duncan Grant among others. But it was not until he and Vanessa befriended Roger Fry in 1910 that Bell began publicly to champion the modern French artists such as Gauguin and Cézanne whom he had come to love. (Bell praised works by his wife and Grant, but saw them, like all British artists, as following where French art had led.) In *Art*, published in 1914, he laid out his view of modern art, and claimed that what he called 'significant form' was the unifying feature of all works of art across all times and places. In part, this was a reaction to British philistinism. In 1910, the exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, organised by Fry, had caused consternation among critics and the public. (It's worth remembering that as late as the 1940s the Tate refused to acquire major works by Matisse.) Circumventing specialist periodicals, newspapers and the lecture halls in which debates about modern art tended to take place, Bell attempted in *Art* to engage a far larger audience.

His basic argument was that modern art was not a revolution, but a realisation of, or return to, the values of the best art from all historical periods. Such art, Bell suggested, was united by its concern not with a faithful representation of the world, but with 'significant form' – something that couldn't be identified precisely, but was the kind of thing you knew when you saw it, or *felt* it. Significant form gave rise to 'aesthetic emotion', a heightened form of experience that art alone could provide. Bell's thesis provided a neat means of identifying important art (that which possessed significant form), a theory of what art had to offer (aesthetic emotion) and a new canon ('modern' art, in possessing significant form, was united with various non-Western, Byzantine and 'primitive' art forms, and distinct from the Western 'realist' tradition). He was taking aim at the denigrators of modern art: the 'conservative' supporters of academic painting who believed that subject matter and representational skill were of central importance. Bell told them that they were judging by the wrong criteria.

*Art* was impressive, but not exactly original. Critics like Fry had already set out the central role of 'form' in expressing and provoking emotions

beyond those of 'ordinary life'. Fry had also written that modern art rejected 'external' appearance in favour of formal qualities and suggested the new canon that Bell would outline in *Art*. Bell's originality lay in the elegant simplicity and enthusiasm with which he communicated the message. The new philosophy of art was summed up in one brief chapter, 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis', that could easily stand for the whole – it still features on student reading lists. Bell brilliantly mixed appeals to the reader's personal experience ('We have no other means of recognising a work of art than our feeling for it'; 'All sensitive people agree there is a peculiar emotion provoked by works of art') with provocative statements that swept away received opinion ('The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant').

For many, Bell's book solved the apparent mysteries of modern art. Ivon Hitchens said that after reading it 'the world opened onto the great modern French masters'; Albert Barnes wrote that no other book had been so helpful in making sense of the collection of modern art he amassed at the Barnes Foundation. But *Art* also had a wider audience. It was enormously popular, and constantly reprinted; when mass market Pelican paperbacks arrived in the 1930s its position was entrenched. It's difficult, now, to feel the same enthusiasm. There are logical flaws: it's hard to define significant form or aesthetic emotion, for instance, and attempts to do so quickly become circular. (Significant form gives rise to aesthetic emotion, aesthetic emotion is generated by significant form.) Since at least the 1980s, academics have also criticised Bell for articulating a blind universalism that is really a kind of cultural imperialism, imposing personal values on other cultures.

For contemporary critics there was a more pressing problem. Bell's definition of modern art seemed to exclude much of modernism, and to define art more generally in a way that ignored much of what it actually was and did. In Bell's schema, movements such as Cubism and Futurism were eccentric because they attempted to represent particular events or aspects of contemporary life rather than being concerned with the proper goal of aesthetic emotion. Meanwhile, the work of British artists as different as Walter Sickert and Wyndham Lewis was seen merely as a sad echo of what had happened in Paris years earlier. And, despite his

concern for form, neither in *Art* or anywhere else did Bell ever fully endorse abstract art. It was for this reason that it was predicted – the remark is sometimes attributed to T.S. Eliot – that he would ‘survive not as an individual, but as the representative of a little world of 1914’. Mark Hussey valiantly attempts to show that Bell’s life and career amount to more than just one good book, but although Bell wrote much more on art and culture that remains entertaining reading, he never really refined or developed his early position. His final book about art was the self-explanatory and hand-waving *Enjoying Pictures* (1934), and he made no efforts to revise or correct *Art* for later editions. His main activity after 1914, as Hussey assiduously details, was not literary but social, greased by his wealth and new fame. Bell made his way between the English shires, the squares and streets of London, and the Paris homes and studios of artists such as Picasso and Cocteau, in a whirl of dances and romances, champagne and cocaine. His pursuit of one woman after another, with the through-note of his love for Mary Hutchinson, wasn’t always happy (his marriage with Vanessa Bell had ended, amicably, by the start of the First World War). But it’s hard to feel very sorry for a man who insisted on having it all, got more than his fair share, and spent his life increasingly embittered about the little that had been denied him.

Bell’s proximity to modernism means that Hussey’s biography is an important addition to the literature, but proximity is not the same thing as significance. After 1914, the ‘Making of Modernism’ was something Bell was only peripherally involved in. His early work was important because it helped people understand something that had seemed forbidding, but his judgments soon became suspect (he continually insisted that André Derain was one of the great modern masters and in the 1930s still refused to acknowledge abstract art). A 1927 poem published after the end of his affair with the much younger Bertha Penrose suggests he knew the score: ‘Will your young visage smile back at mine,/Blue as the morning, merry as wine,/Or shall I appear, as alas! I can,/A cultured, intelligent, middle-aged man?’